Shaping the African Standby Force:
Developments, Challenges, and Prospects

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AFRICA IS STEEPED in armed conflict and instability. The most violent and devastating conflicts on the continent have been intrastate in nature with considerable peacekeeping consequences for regional and international role-players.

In January 2004, African ministers of defense and security, meeting at the African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, adopted the "Draft Framework for a Common African Defence and Security Policy."[1] The ministers reviewed progress made in developing an African standby peacekeeping force and an early warning system to detect and prevent potential conflicts and to ensure rapid humanitarian relief during disasters. In July 2004, the AU Assembly (of heads of state or government), meeting in Addis Ababa, formally adopted the defense and security policy as Africa's "blueprint" in the search for peace, security, and stability on the continent.

Realizing that Africa should develop military mechanisms to deal with "common security threats, which undermine the maintenance and promotion of peace, security, and stability on the continent," the AU adopted the "Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and Security Council" in July 2002 to establish a military staff committee to advise and assist the Peace and Security Council on all questions relating to military and security requirements.[2] The Protocol provides for an African Standby Force (ASF) to enable the Peace and Security Council to deploy peacekeeping missions and intervene pursuant to the provisions of the AU Constitutive Act.[3] The ASF is the implementing mechanism for the Peace and Security Council's decisions. In May 2003, the AU also adopted the "Policy Framework for the Establishment of the African Standby Force and the Military Staff Committee."[4]

Planning and Force Structure

During his term as chairman of the AU, South African President Thabo Mbeki urged member states to give special priority to establishing an ASF to allow the continent to solve its conflicts. "Recent international events have confirmed the need for us Africans to do everything we can to rely on our own capacities to secure our continent's renaissance," Mbeki said.[5]

The ASF, a multinational force empowered to intervene in serious conflicts around the troubled continent will deploy under the auspices of the AU to intervene in border wars and internal conflicts and will consist of five regionally based brigades (3,000 to 4,000 troops) and a sixth formation at the AU's headquarters at Addis Ababa for a combined capacity of 15,000 to 20,000 peacekeepers.[6]

The ASF will be composed of multidisciplinary standby contingents, with civilian and military components located in their countries of origin and ready for rapid deployment on appropriate notice. The Peace and Security Council Protocol provides that the ASF shall—

  ▫ Observe and monitor missions.
  ▫ Conduct other types of peacekeeping missions.
  ▫ Intervene in the affairs of a member state during grave circumstances or at its request to restore peace and security.

◻ Conduct preventive deployment.

◻ Conduct peacebuilding operations, including postconflict disarmament and demobilization.

◻ Provide humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of people in conflict and disaster areas.

◻ Perform other functions the Peace and Security Council or the AU mandates.

At a meeting in Addis Ababa in May 2003, the African Chiefs of Defense Staff swiftly moved to adopt a "Policy Framework for the Establishment of the African Standby Force and the Military Staff Committee."[7] Drafted by African military experts, the policy framework outlines several possible "conflict and mission scenarios" the AU and the ASF are likely to confront:[8]

◻ Providing AU/regional military advice to a political mission.

◻ Performing AU/regional observer missions codeployed with a UN mission.

◻ Performing stand-alone AU/regional observer missions.

◻ Acting as an AU/regional peacekeeping force for Chapter VI and preventive deployment missions.

◻ Acting as an AU peacekeeping force for complex multidimensional missions with low-level spoilers (a feature of many current conflicts).

◻ Intervening in genocide situations when the international community does not act promptly.

The speed with which forces must deploy has implications for force structures. Deployment should be complete in 30 days except during genocides, in which case a robust military force must deploy within 14 days.[9] The ASF will become operational in two incremental phases: developing a capacity to manage scenarios 1 to 3 by the end of 2005 and developing a capability to deal with the remaining scenarios by 2010.[10]

The first phase ends on 30 June 2005, by which time the AU should be able to deploy and manage monitoring missions, and regions should have developed a standby brigade capacity with a full-time planning element of 15 staff members. Realizing that some regions might take more time to develop standby forces, the African chiefs of defense recommended that, as a stop-gap arrangement, potential lead nations should form coalitions pending the establishment of such a capacity by all participating nations. In addition, by 30 June 2005, the AU would have a roster of 300 to 500 military observers and 240 police officers ready to move on 14 days' notice.[11]

The second phase would end on 30 June 2010, by which time the AU should have developed the capacity to manage a complex peacekeeping operation. Regions would continue developing an ability

to undertake regional peacekeeping operations. Those that will have established standby brigades will be encouraged to enhance their rapid deployment capabilities. They will also be required to incorporate a small headquarters planning unit within the AU headquarters as well as in each of the five regions. Each headquarters will plan and manage the size, mandate, and structure of a standby peacekeeping force.[12]

The ASF will be based on the UN's Multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) for UN operations headquartered near Copenhagen, Denmark. The Brigade, a consequence of the UN's "humiliations" in Rwanda and Srebrenica (Bosnia), musters between 4,000 and 5,000 troops when fully deployed. In its current form it consists of a multinational headquarters staff based on a permanent planning staff of 13 officers supported by 10 Danish staff members.[13] In fact, SHIRBRIG has offered to help the AU establish the ASF. Although some resistance exists to basing the ASF on a Western model, SHIRBRIG's experience could prove invaluable to ASF planners.[14]

Challenges and Constraints

The much discussed recommendations of the 2000 "Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations," chaired by Lakhadar Brahimi, have far-reaching implications for AU and regional peace support efforts, especially with regard to organization, equipment, training, doctrine, and capacities.[15] The Panel's contention that "[t]here are many tasks which United Nations peacekeeping forces should not be asked to undertake and many places they should go" requires serious consideration of issues relating to mission-capable forces on the African continent.[16]

The report has made collaboration with the UN system even more fundamental.[17] Events in Africa suggest a trend that regional and subregional organizations are the first to respond to emerging crisis situations. They also conduct short, robust stabilization or peace-enforcement operations, then undertake multidimensional UN peacekeeping missions.[18] This division of labor between the UN and regional organizations accommodates the two organizations' strengths and weaknesses. Neither the UN nor regional organizations respond swiftly to crises on the African continent, although the regional organizations do deploy somewhat sooner than the UN. More important, regional organizations are not required to meet UN criteria, minimum standards, or levels of readiness.[19]

The first 6 to 12 weeks after a cease-fire or peace accord are often critical to establishing a stable peace and peacekeeper credibility. Credibility and political

momentum lost during this period is difficult to regain. The AU will have the capacity to react quickly with personnel, materiel readiness, and funding.[20]

Peacekeeping in Africa also has financial constraints, and peacekeeping endeavors are costly. African peacekeeping is not limited by political will or the availability of troops but, rather, by insufficient funding. Even relatively small and less logistically demanding unarmed military observer missions are costly. The AU and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), were unable to provide finances from their own budgets.

The budget for the OAU Liaison Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea amounted to $1.8 million per year in 2000. The original planned strength for the mission was 43 civilian and military personnel, but because of financial constraints, in 2000 the actual strength was 27. The African Mission in Burundi, considerably larger than any other AU or the OAU mission, had 3,335 personnel and an operational budget of approximately $110 million per year. The 2003 AU budget was approximately $32 million.[21]

The AU is in arrears $40 million from previous budgets and depends on the goodwill of its "lead nations" and the international community for financial support.[22] The AU must address the high costs of these missions if the ASF is to play any significant peacekeeping role in Africa.

AU and ASF functionaries must establish rosters of mission leaders and military, police, and civilian experts; be able to plan and develop missions quickly; and establish unity of command and staff capacities for new missions. Quick disbursement of funds and procurement of essential goods will be an important component of any effective rapid-deployment capacity.[23]

Multidimensional security requires peacekeeping forces to train on issues related to HIV/AIDS, gender, children's rights, civil-military coordination, human rights, international humanitarian law, and peace enforcement and intervention. The AU can intervene in a member state's affairs pursuant to a decision of the assembly of heads of state or government during grave circumstances, such as when war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity occur.[24]

Building Blocks

The "Policy Framework for the Establishment of the African Standby Force and the Military Staff Committee" calls on regions to develop standby brigades as reinforcements for classical peacekeeping missions (scenario 4) and for complex, multidimensional peacekeeping missions (scenario 5).[25]

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its military arm, the ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), as well as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), are perhaps the best known subregional organizations involved in robust peacekeeping. African states and subregional role-players show a willingness to prepare for and undertake diplomatic and military action, as can be seen in "indigenous" interventions in Liberia in 1990, Sierra Leone in 1997, Guinea-Bissau in 1998, the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998, and Lesotho in 1999.

The ECOWAS Defense and Security Commission took the lead in establishing a West African standby force of 6,500 soldiers that could deploy rapidly in response to crisis or threats to peace and security in the West African subregion. The Commission's 9th session in Abuja, Nigeria, in June 2004, effectively replaced ECOMOG with what is to be known as the ECOWAS Task Force, a 1,500-man force bolstered by a brigade of 3,500 additional troops and another 1,500 soldiers in reserve.[26] ECOWAS can deploy in 30 days, while the brigade can deploy in 90 days and be self-sustaining for another 90 days.[27]

Soldiers for the standby force are drawn from pre-determined units and selected on the basis of their experiences in previous deployments in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire. The ECOWAS secretariat defines the operational requirements of the force; assesses the military capability of member states in terms of equipment and logistics; and determines the infrastructure needed for regional logistic depots.

A 3,000-strong East African brigade established for peacekeeping operations under the flag of the AU was created when defense chiefs from 11 nations agreed to set up the unit. Troops for the East African brigade are to remain in their respective countries, but the force has its headquarters in Addis Ababa with a secretariat in Nairobi, Kenya. Command of the brigade rotates annually in alphabetical order among the member states of Burundi, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda.[28]

Representing more than 50 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa's Gross National Product and about 40 percent of the region's area, SADC is coming to terms with the challenges of establishing a subregional standby capacity.[29] The nations that attended the SADC summit in Tanzania in 2003 agreed on a classic mutual defense pact.[30] The pact does not specifically provide for the formation of a standby force, but commits states to—

⬜ Training military personnel in any field of military endeavor and to hold joint military exercises

in one another's territory.

 Exchanging military intelligence and information except that restricted for national security reasons.

 Conducting joint research, development, and production of military equipment, including weapons and munitions.

 Procuring or facilitating the supply of defense equipment and services among defense-related industries and defense research establishments and their respective armed forces.

At a meeting of past, current, and future chairmen of SADC's Organ on Politics, Defense, and Security Cooperation in Pretoria in December 2004, SADC committed to creating a SADC standby brigade and gave the green light to its military chiefs to appoint a planning team to do so. The brigade's full complement of troops will not be stationed at a headquarters, but will be called on when needed.[31] Whether the brigade can deploy alongside the UN within 30 days of receiving orders and meet other AU timeframes is unclear.

The ASF is a major step toward forming a multinational military force for intervening militarily in serious conflicts around the troubled continent of Africa. African leaders seem to be keen on avoiding a repeat of a genocide such as that in Rwanda in 1994, when extremists from the Hutu majority slaughtered an estimated 800,000 minority Tutsi and Hutu moderates in 100 days of mass murder. If plans come to fruition, by the end of this decade Africa should have a six-brigade, UN-style force ready to police conflicts. The ASF's formation, which is of great significance, embodies Africa's long-desired dream of policing its own trouble spots.

Political support is not lacking for the ASF, but valid concerns persist about the financial implications of developing it. Significant costs related to its establishment have led African leaders to seek support from the international community. Realizing that financial and technical assistance will be pivotal to successful ASF development, a joint Africa/G8 Action Plan aims to enhance African capabilities to undertake peace support operations so that by 2010, African partners will be able to prevent and resolve violent conflict on the continent. The G8 has contributed substantial support—in funding and technical assistance—to develop a capacity for peacekeeping operations and an effective network of training centers for military and civilian personnel in peacekeeping operations.[32]

In the final analysis, responsibility for security in Africa is devolving to African states and regional organizations. If the AU is to become a leading organization in African conflict resolution, it must, in the words of two South African analysts, "seize the opportunity to implement the provisions of the [AU] Constitutive Act. Its success will rightly be judged on whether it can and will respond to situations of armed conflict and on the extent to which the presence of AU or regional peacekeeping forces will manage the strategic and operational challenges required to resolve complex multidimensional peace support or enforcement operations."[33] *MR*

NOTES

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